

VZCZCXRO8419  
RR RUEHMA RUEHPA  
DE RUEHNK #0716/01 3391216  
ZNR UUUUU ZZH  
R 041216Z DEC 08  
FM AMEMBASSY NOUAKCHOTT  
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC 7907  
INFO RUEHZK/ECOWAS COLLECTIVE  
RUEHLMC/MCC WASHINGTON DC  
RUEHFR/AMEMBASSY PARIS 0683

UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 NOUAKCHOTT 000716

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: [KISL](#) [KMDR](#) [PREL](#) [MR](#) [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [SOCI](#) [KCOR](#) [KPAO](#) [NG](#)  
SUBJECT: SPEAKER VISIT FURTHERS QUIET DIPLOMACY

NOUAKCHOTT 00000716 001.2 OF 002

¶1. IIP Speaker Mohammed Bashar Arafat visited Nouakchott from November 23 until November 26 2008. During this time, he gave presentations on Islam In America to two universities in Nouakchott, the University of Nouakchott (11/24) and the Islamic Institute, ISERI (11/25) reaching over 600 students in total and visited a local Mahadra where he lectured 30 students (11/26). He led evening prayers at Imam Enahwhi's Noor Mosque (11/24) and afternoon prayers for local staff at the US Embassy on (11/26). Imam Arafat met and shared meals in intimate settings with the most important local religious leaders from the range of local ethnic and religious affiliations.

¶2. The English-language Lecture at the University of Nouakchott English Department was to a standing room of almost 300 students who listened attentively, took notes, and asked pertinent questions for eventual class papers. The University houses one of Mauritania's only two American Corners, which is overused and exceedingly popular. The 1,600 student Faculty of English produces all of the country's future Fulbright scholars and many eventual International Visitors. They were all given copies of the French and English "Islam in America" booklets and many requested Imam Arafat's autograph upon departure from the Auditorium. The audience included 3rd and 4th year English students, PhD students, professors, and journalists. The embassy's relationship with the University is very important and English language speakers addressing topics of mutual interest reinforces this relationship. The Dean of the English Department, former IV Mamadou Diawara gave Imam Arafat's introduction. Students asked questions about whether our visitor felt prejudiced against as a Moslem in America, whether the US had any problems with offensive cartoons like the Danish and whether Islam was growing in America. Imam Arafat took this opportunity to reinforce the respect for diversity in American society however mentioning that he too faced problems with border security at airports. A dinner with Imam Hamden, President of the Association of Ulemas, led to in-depth discussion of the philosophical meaning of many theological practices in Islam and the concept of tolerance in the Koran. They also discussed projects that would allow young Imams to learn English in the US, sending 5-7 from Mauritania to the US for such a linguistic, but also cultural, exchange.

¶3. The lecture at the Islamic Institute ISERI, widely regarded as a hotbed of Islamic fundamentalism, included a full audience of over 250 students, professors and leaders. The Islamic Institute houses the second of the two Embassy sponsored American corners in Mauritania. The presentation was well received, but a staged intervention by the extremist political party and a professor hurled anti-American remarks unrelated to Islam in America and purely political in nature. It should be noted that on a prior trip to ISERI the SSI speaker was boycotted. Given the politically hostile environment this reception was expected, and the grace and humility with which Imam Arafat reacted to such interventions and turned them into opportunities for discussion was remarkable. As a leading intellectual and most influential and important journalist in Mauritania, the meeting with Abou Maali and Imam Arafat was an important introduction where issues handicapping the Arab world were discussed such as old dictators, new intolerance and occupation, all

which he sees as mutually reinforcing one another. During the dinner at the Charge's a diverse array of key religious (Pulaar and Soninke Imams) and intellectual leaders (journalists) sat at one table discussing Islam in America and America's current policy towards Mauritania.

¶4. The lecture at the Mahadra addressed over 30 upper level Islamic students from Mauritania, Algeria and Mali on Islam in America and Imam Arafat's visits to the region to promote this. He reinforced his opinion that Muslims need to take advantage of technology to learn English and become more capable of interacting on a global scale. Some students criticized "the new Muslim way of learning Islam" when it leads to terrorism. They explained that their Mahadra's Islamic theology focuses on tolerance and open dialogue with others. This meeting was followed by a personal meeting with Pulaar Imam Ball Mohamed Bechir, an Afro-Mauritanian Imam who had met Arafat on a previous trip. Bechir promised to visit Baltimore and give lectures at Arafat's mosque when he comes for his next annual Ramadan visit to the US in August.

¶5. A lunchtime roundtable discussion at the US Embassy cafeteria was a resounding success with almost 50 local staff and Americans sitting in on the power-point presentation and lively Q and A. Afterwards, local staff invited Imam Arafat to lead their afternoon prayer. It was an opportunity for everyone, Mauritians and Americans alike, to learn about Moslems in America and exactly what a speaker presents to the local public when he travels. Discussion went well over the hour and a half time limit and many stayed on to speak with Imam Arafat individually, over lunch.

¶6. Post considers this successful program to have come at a very opportune moment for Mauritania-American relations. Given the tense political environment, in which the US is being blamed for having taking the staunchest stance against the August 6th military coup, proffering the quickest sanctions and not budging, it was important

NOUAKCHOTT 00000716 002.2 OF 002

to rekindle a religious and cultural dialogue devoid of overt political implications. It furthers post's priority MSP of hastening a reinstitution of democracy and promotes mutual understanding (Muslem Outreach) and national unity (Mauritanian, between White Moors, Black Moors and Afro-Mauritians).

¶7. Given to target audiences, through personal narrative and historical anecdote, Imam Arafat introduced a heretofore unknown Moslem American population and explained how their civil liberties are protected and advanced. Imam Arafat offered a landscape running counter to the international media focus on US policy to the Moslem world and repression of Moslem's civil liberties in the US. Instead he explained the freedom and flourishing of their population and their continuations to the worldwide Moslem population. He highlighted the true nature of Islam that is often manipulated by extremists the world over and encouraged all to embrace this form of Islam, germane to Mauritania's Malachite Sufism. His power point presentation, with illustrative photographs of historical Moslem-American figures and exchange programs in renowned capitals of significance for Moslems, sparked a dialogue on a topic of mutual knowledge, the history of Islam, but through the lens of a Moslem American. Through this medium Imam Arafat was able to build bridges of dialogue with interlocutors who have been less willing to engage due to the current political situation. In small meetings with influential Imams, over meals and with their families, he engaged in deep, philosophical and textual Koranic debates, advancing these relationships. Many meetings ended with the promise of further engagement and collaboration on projects of mutual interest including interfaith exchanges and the opening of a new Islamic University.

¶8. Through numerous small encounters, Imam Arafat cemented friendships with many key Mauritanian Imams sharing his Sufi Islamic approach or simply his commitment to interfaith dialogue and the advancement of a tolerant form of Islam. An example of the fruit of such an encounter, was the official invitation Imam Hafed Enahwi gave to Imam Arafat for him to return to Mauritania in March 2009 to attend the large and important annual Sufi leaders conference, this year's topic: "Moderate Islam and Globalization." This annual

symposium is important and heavily attended, attracting Sufi Moslems from around the world, the total number of attendees often exceeding 1,000. His attendance would be important to advance not only Mission interest, but also those of his NGO and Mauritanian Islam.

¶9. Imam Arafat's presentations highlighting the commonalities between American Moslems and their international counterparts revealed a side of America many had never thought existed and his message of renewed dialogue, and the naturally pacifistic nature of Islam resounded. Following the hijacking of the debate as the Islamic institute, Imam Arafat asked students to raise their hands to show support if they wanted him to continue. The implication being that his message of tolerance and interfaith dialogue had resonated and all but three students raised their hands. The impact of such rhetorical question is clear: despite a clear manipulation of the gathering by the administration to its own political end, to spark an Anti-American political protest, the students had made up their own minds and were interested in hearing about the message of tolerance and interfaith dialogue that Imam Arafat furthered. This type of exemplary reaction embodied grace and wisdom and served as a model for many students. It was clear that many Mauritians were encouraged in hearing that Muslims in America are becoming very active and many expressed optimism in the wake of Obama's election.

¶10. Given the current Mauritanian political context post was careful to craft a program that would avoid situations that would place our guest in a position of having to defend or address US policy, which is currently highly contested, controversial and openly opposed. Therefore, large gatherings and press conferences were avoided. Already, we heard rumblings that through the Imam's visit the US was trying to "keep the door open" while politically closing the door, through sanctions, or as one student put it, using the Imam's visit as a way for the US "clean their dirty face". We focused instead on quiet diplomacy, allowing dialogue to unfold in intimate settings. This proved equally fruitful with key influencers spending extended time with Imam Arafat, developing trust and looking to the future of increased cooperation.

HANKINS